

Elder Robert D. Hales

Lehi taught the principle of agency

I am grateful for the testimony of our prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley. On behalf of all members throughout the world, I express gratitude that he chose to follow the inspiration of the Lord and asked us to read the Book of Mormon. We have been abundantly blessed by his inspired counsel.

Father Lehi, the first prophet recorded in the Book of Mormon, also chose to follow the Lord. He was instructed to “take his family and depart into the wilderness.”¹ Despite harsh traveling conditions and the murmuring of his sons Laman and Lemuel, Lehi led his family to a land of promise. But it was not a place of peace. As Laman and Lemuel used their agency to disobey the Lord, Lehi’s “heart [was] weighed down with sorrow [for them].”² Before his death, Lehi gathered his children around him, blessed them, and counseled them.³ To his rebellious sons he urged repentance and faithfulness: “Awake, my sons. . . . Shake off the chains with which ye are bound.”⁴ And to his righteous son Jacob he taught one final, very important lesson.

If we could leave one lesson of greatest importance for *our* children and grandchildren, what would it be? Of all the glorious principles of the gospel, Lehi chose to teach his son about the plan of salvation—and the gift of agency.

He taught that “men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil.”⁵ This sacred instruction began in the heavens. There, in a Grand Council, our Heavenly Father would continue the gift of agency to prove us here in mortality, “to see if [we] will do all things whatsoever the Lord [our] God shall command.”⁶

Rebellion of Satan

But Satan opposed God and His plan, saying, “I will redeem all mankind . . . ;

wherefore give me thine honor.”⁷ “Wherefore, because . . . Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, . . . I caused that he should be cast down.”⁸ “And, at that day, many followed after him.”⁹ Indeed, “a third part of the hosts of heaven”¹⁰ used their agency to reject God’s plan.

You and I were among those who used their agency to accept Heavenly Father’s plan to come to earth, to have a mortal life, to progress. “We shouted for joy . . . to have the opportunity of coming to the earth to receive bodies [for we knew] that we might become, through faithfulness, like unto our Father, God.”¹¹

Opposition a part of mortality

Now we are here on earth, where opportunities to use our agency abound, for here “there is an opposition in all things.”¹² This opposition is essential to the purpose of our lives. As Lehi explained: “To bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man, . . . the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other.”¹³

Adam and Eve were the first of God’s children to experience these enticements. Having sought the misery of all mankind, Satan, “the father of all lies,”¹⁴ tempted Adam and Eve. Because they chose to partake of the “forbidden fruit they were driven out of the garden of Eden, to till the earth.”¹⁵ Because of that choice, they also “brought forth children; . . . even the family of all the earth,”¹⁶ and this earthly state “became a state of probation”¹⁷ for them and for their posterity. For “behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things,” Lehi told Jacob. “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.”¹⁸

Sometimes we forget that our Heavenly Father desires that each of us have this joy. Only by yielding to temptation and sin can we be kept from that joy. And yielding is exactly what Satan wants us to do.

I once had an opportunity to accompany President Spencer W. Kimball to a distant land. We were given a tour of the various sites in the area, including underground catacombs—burial grounds for people who had been persecuted by Christian zealots. As we came up the dark, narrow stairs of that place, President Kimball taught me an unforgettable lesson. He pulled my coattail and said, “It has always troubled me what the adversary does using the name of our Savior.” He then said, “Robert, the adversary can never have joy unless you and I sin.”

As I contemplated this comment and studied the scriptures, I began to understand what President Kimball may have meant. I recalled the word of the Lord to all the inhabitants of the earth as recorded in the Book of Mormon: “Wo, wo, wo unto this people; wo unto the inhabitants of the whole earth except they shall repent; for the devil laugheth, and his angels rejoice, because of the slain of the fair sons and daughters of my people.”¹⁹ It is our sins that make the devil laugh, our sorrow that brings him counterfeit joy.

Satan influences us only if we allow it

Although the devil laughs, his power is limited. Some may remember the old adage: “The devil made me do it.” Today I want to convey, in absolutely certain terms, that the adversary cannot make us do anything. He does lie at our door, as the scriptures say, and he follows us each day.²⁰ Every time we go out, every decision we make, we are either choosing to move in his direction or in the direction of our Savior. But the adversary must depart if we tell him to depart. He cannot influence us unless we allow him to do so, and

he knows that! The only time he can affect our minds and bodies—our very spirits—is when we *allow* him to do so. In other words, we do not have to succumb to his enticements!

We have been given agency, we have been given the blessings of the priesthood, and we have been given the Light of Christ and the Holy Ghost *for a reason*. That reason is our growth and happiness in this world and eternal life in the world to come. Today I ask, have we received that Spirit? Are we following on the strait and narrow path that leads to God and eternal life? Are we holding on to the iron rod, or are we going another way? I testify that how we choose to *feel* and *think* and *act* every day is the way we get on the path, and stay on it, until we reach our eternal destination.

Acting rather than being acted upon

Now, none of us are on the narrow path *all* of the time. All of us make mistakes. That is why Lehi, who understood the Savior’s role in preserving and reclaiming our agency, taught Jacob—and us: “The Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon.”²¹ That is the key—“to act for themselves and not to be acted upon.”

In these latter days, as in the times of old, we must avoid being acted upon by acting for ourselves to avoid evil. The Holy Ghost will prompt us. Joseph was told to flee from Potiphar’s wife. Abraham obeyed the commandment to flee out of the land of Ur. Lehi was instructed to flee Jerusalem before it was destroyed. And to protect the Savior’s life, Mary and Joseph were prompted to flee into Egypt.

The promptings that come to us to flee evil reflect our Heavenly Father’s understanding of our particular strengths

and weaknesses and His awareness of the unforeseen circumstances of our lives. When these promptings come, they will not generally stop us in our tracks, for the Spirit of God does not speak with a voice of thunder. The voice will be as soft as a whisper, coming as a thought to our minds or a feeling in our hearts. By heeding its gentle promptings, we will be protected from the destructive consequences of sin.

But if we ignore those promptings, the light of the Spirit will fade. Our agency will be limited or lost, and we will lose the confidence and ability to act. We will be “walking in [spiritual] darkness at noon-day.”²² Then how easy it is to wander into strange paths and become lost! How quickly we are bound in the chains of sin spoken of by Lehi to his rebellious sons.²³ For example, if we make choices that put us deeply in debt, we will lose our agency to meet our wants and needs or to save for that inevitable rainy day. If we choose to break the law, we may be put in prison, where our agency is so limited that we cannot choose where we go, who we see, or what we do. Spirit prison is very much like that. Therefore, to retain our agency we must daily walk in the light of our Lord and Savior and follow the path of obedience. It is the only path that leads to our Father in Heaven.

Exercising agency to overcome sin

If, through our unrighteous choices, we have lost our footing on that path, we must remember the agency we were given, agency we may choose to exercise again. I speak especially to those overcome by the thick darkness of addiction. If you have fallen into destructive, addictive behaviors, you may feel that you are spiritually in a black hole. As with the real black holes in space, it may seem all but impossible for light to penetrate to where you are. How do you escape? I testify the only way is through the very agency you exercised so valiantly in your premortal life, the agency

that the adversary cannot take away without your yielding it to him.

How do you reclaim that agency? How do you begin again to exercise it in the right way? You choose to act in faith and obedience. May I suggest a few basic choices that you can begin to make now—this very day.

Choose to accept—truly accept—that you are a child of God, that He loves you, and that He has the power to help you.

Choose to put everything—literally everything—on the altar before Him. Believing that you are His child, decide that your life belongs to Him and that you will use your agency to do His will. You may do this multiple times in your life, but never, never give up.

Choose to put yourself in a position to have experiences with the Spirit of God through prayer, in scripture study, at Church meetings, in your home, and through wholesome interactions with others. When you feel the influence of the Spirit, you are beginning to be cleansed and strengthened. The light is being turned on, and where that light shines, the darkness of evil cannot remain.

Choose to obey and keep your covenants, beginning with your baptismal covenant. Renew these covenants weekly by worthily partaking of the sacrament.

Choose to prepare to worthily attend the temple, make and renew sacred covenants, and receive all of the saving ordinances and blessings of the gospel.

Finally, and most importantly, *choose* to believe in the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Accept the Savior’s forgiveness, and then forgive yourself. Because of His sacrifice for you, He has the power to “remember [your sins] no more.”²⁴ You must do likewise.

After you are on the path and are “free to choose” again, choose to reject feelings of shame for sins you have already repented of, refuse to be discouraged about the past, and rejoice in hope for the future. Remember, it is Satan who desires

that we be “miserable like unto himself.”²⁵ Let your desires be stronger than his. Be happy and confident about your life and about the opportunities and blessings that await you here and throughout eternity.

Finally, remember our agency is not only for us. We have the responsibility to use it in behalf of others, to lift and strengthen others in their trials and tribulations. Some of our brothers and sisters have lost the full use of their agency through unrighteous choices. Without exposing ourselves to temptation, we can and should invite others to receive the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through friendship and love, we may lead them along the path of obedience and encourage them to use their agency to make the right choices once again.

Blessings of agency

As Father Lehi testified to his family of the blessings of agency, I also desire to testify to you, my beloved brothers and sisters throughout the world, and to my family. Agency was manifested in the Council in Heaven as we chose to follow our Heavenly Father’s plan and come to mortality for this probationary period. Agency allows us to be tested and tried to see whether or not we will endure to the end and return to our Heavenly Father with honor. Agency is the catalyst that leads us to express our inward spiritual desires in outward Christlike behavior. Agency permits us to make faithful, obedient choices that strengthen us so that we can lift and strengthen others. Agency used righteously allows light to dispel the darkness and enables us to live with joy and happiness in the present, look with faith to the future, even into the eternities, and not dwell on the things of the past. Our use of agency determines who we are and what we will be.

To all who desire to enjoy the supernal blessings of agency, I testify that agency is strengthened by our faith and obedience. Agency leads us to act: to seek that we may find, to ask that we may receive guidance from the Spirit, to knock on that door that leads to spiritual light and ultimately salvation. I bear special witness that our Savior Jesus Christ is the source of that light, even the Light and Life of the World. As we use our agency to follow Him, His light will grow within us brighter and brighter until that perfect day²⁶ when we are welcomed into the presence of our Father in Heaven for all eternity. That we will use our agency to that sacred and glorious end, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. 1 Nephi 2:2.
2. 2 Nephi 1:17.
3. See 2 Nephi 1:14.
4. 2 Nephi 1:23.
5. 2 Nephi 2:5.
6. See Abraham 3:24–25.
7. Moses 4:1.
8. Moses 4:3.
9. Abraham 3:28.
10. Doctrine and Covenants 29:36.
11. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Man, His Origin and Destiny* (1965), 277.
12. 2 Nephi 2:11.
13. 2 Nephi 2:15–16.
14. 2 Nephi 2:18.
15. 2 Nephi 2:19.
16. 2 Nephi 2:20.
17. 2 Nephi 2:21.
18. 2 Nephi 2:24–25.
19. 3 Nephi 9:2.
20. See Genesis 4:7; Moses 5:23.
21. 2 Nephi 2:26.
22. Doctrine and Covenants 95:6.
23. See 2 Nephi 1:13.
24. Doctrine and Covenants 58:42.
25. 2 Nephi 2:27.
26. See Doctrine and Covenants 50:24.